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Kentucky is Spotlight State at Sunbelt Expo

Sep 25, 2008 9:37 AM, By Roy Roberson
Farm Press Editorial Staff

Kentucky basketball, bluegrass music and thoroughbred horses have all been a part of the Bluegrass State's agricultural history. As visitors to this year's Sunbelt Ag Expo will discover, there is a lot more to Kentucky agriculture.

The state has made, and continues to make, great strides toward lessening dependence of its farm industry on tobacco production. Kentucky has invested over half, \$265 million, of the cash settlement from the Kentucky Master Settlement Agreement, into Kentucky agriculture.

As in other tobacco producing states, former Kentucky tobacco farmers have transitioned into an array of farming enterprises, thanks in large part to wise investment of funds for agricultural projects designed to increase net farm income and create sustainable new farm enterprises.

As part of their Spotlight State activities, Kentucky will feature several aspects of the highly success Kentucky Proud marketing program. In March of 2008, legislation passed making Kentucky Proud the official agriculture marketing program in the state and insured its long-term future.

House Bill 626 permanently makes Kentucky Proud the state's farm marketing program, authorizes the agriculture commissioner to collect fees to fund the program, allows Kentucky Proud funds to be carried over from one fiscal year to the next, and establishes a 12-member council to advise the Kentucky Department of Agriculture on administering the program.

Kentucky Proud helps find markets for their products. The blue, green and red logo tells consumers the product was raised and/or processed in Kentucky by Kentuckians. The Kentucky Proud movement has grown from a few dozen members to more than 1,000 since 2004. Kentucky Proud food products accounted for an estimated \$80 million in retail sales in 2007.

An award winning farm safety program, complete with an interactive farm safety demonstration will be on site for Sunbelt Ag Expo visitors to test. A rollover simulator and ATV and mower safety programs will also be featured.

The Kentucky Farm Bureau will feature their award winning television program, Bluegrass and Backroads. With more than 460,000 members, Kentucky's Farm Bureau is one of the strongest in the country.

The University of Kentucky will feature an innovative agricultural engineering display that features a quarter scale tractor built by the school's Wildcat Pulling Team.

The UK exhibit will also feature the university's Equine Initiative, a pioneering effort that partners with the State's horse industry.

Though often overshadowed by tobacco and horses, Kentucky's beef cattle industry is the largest east of the Mississippi River. The state's beef cattle industry accounts for nearly 15 percent of Kentucky's \$3 billion livestock industry.

Despite cutbacks in tobacco production throughout the Southeast tobacco belt, Kentucky still ranks first in burley tobacco production. Development of new tobacco markets in China and India have spurred U.S. tobacco production, especially for the high-quality grades of burley tobacco grown in Kentucky.

The state has a thriving poultry industry that recently overtook beef cattle production as the second leading livestock industry, trailing only horses and mules.

Kentucky basketball is another source of state pride, and it too will be featured by this year's Spotlight State. A hoop will be setup outside — complete with a free-throw line. Those who make a shot will have a chance to win a prize.

Adding yet another touch of bluegrass flavor to the 2008 Sunbelt Ag Expo, the Kentucky exhibit will feature bluegrass music. Musicians will be on hand at several functions throughout the four-day Expo.

The Kentucky Farm Bureau, the University of Kentucky and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture — long a team for the state's agriculture industry — will combine to help Kentucky shine as the 2008 Sunbelt Agriculture Expo Spotlight State.

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